

Israel



Diversity

Variety of Jewish Life

Established as the national homeland for the Jewish people, Israel's population includes Jews of every geographic, ethnic, and religious identity.

- Eighty percent of Israelis are Jewish affiliated. They come from widely diverse ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds and from all branches of Judaism.
- About 64 percent of the Jewish population describes itself as secular or traditional. Sixteen percent are ultra-Orthodox Jews.
- Sixty thousand Jews of Ethiopian descent call Israel home.
- The majority of Israeli Jews are the descendants of immigrants from Arab countries.
- At the end of a long struggle for the right to emigrate, over 1 million Jews from the former Soviet Union moved to Israel in the 1990s.





Inclusion of the Arab Minority

Arab-Israelis are the largest minority group in Israel and are active in all facets of Israeli life.

- They have won as many as 12 of the 120 Knesset seats in a single election.
- Israel's first Arab Ambassador, Ali Yahya, was appointed in 1999. Ismail Khaldi, the first Bedouin Consul, was appointed in 2006.
- In January 2008, Israel honored 96-year-old Sheik Abu Muamar with a lifetime achievement award for his commitment to Israel, his military service, and his leadership in the Bedouin community, in which he was called the "sheik of all sheiks."
- In 1999, an Arab woman, 21-year-old Rana Raslan, was named Miss Israel.
- In 2004, Bnei Sakhnin became the first Arab-Israeli soccer team to win the State Cup.



Religious Minorities

Israel is home to many religious minorities and guarantees their right to practice and administer their religions.

- There are 1.4 million non-Jews in Israel—making up about 20 percent of Israel's population.
- Israel officially recognizes 15 distinct religious groups. Each religious community regulates its own rules about marriage, divorce and wills.
- Christians in Israel make up 2.1 percent of the non-Jewish population and increased from 34,000 in 1948 to 180,000 in 2000. Israel is the only Middle Eastern country where the Christian population has grown in the last half century.
- The Israeli city of Haifa is home to the Baha'i world headquarters. The Baha'i Faith is an independent religion that arose in Persia in the mid-19th century.

Ethnic Makeup

As a refuge from discrimination, Israel remains committed to ensuring equality among its diverse populations.

- People from over 70 countries have made Israel their home since its founding in 1948.
- Over 14 percent of Israelis are Arab Muslims, and over 5 percent are Christians, Druze, and Bedouin.
- In 1977, Israel granted asylum to 400 Vietnamese boat people fleeing oppression. Israel has also accepted Liberian and Sudanese refugees.
- About 170,000 Bedouins, an Arab nomadic people, reside in Israel. With the educational opportunities offered in Israel, illiteracy rates among Bedouins has fallen a remarkable 70 percent within a generation.
- Israel is home to 3,000 Circassians, an ancient people from the Caucasus with their own unique culture.



Cultural Achievements

A vibrant music and art scene reflects Israel's diverse culture.

- From the Israel Philharmonic (founded in 1936 by professional musicians escaping the rise of fascism in Europe), to the Mizrahi music created by immigrant Jews from the Arab world, to Israel's first successful rock band, The Churchills, love of music has been a unifying factor for Israelis of every background.
- Israel's first art school, the Bezal Academy of Art in Jerusalem, was founded in 1906. Today, Israel has more museums per capita than any other country in the world.
- Israel has ten film schools and seven international film festivals, and more than 2.5 million people every year enjoy Israeli-made films.



Israel Philharmonic



The Churchills—1960s



Mizrahi music performance



Kibbutzim/Entrepreneurial

Israel's modern way of life balances the early Jewish pioneers' dedication to communal living and respect for the land with a love of entrepreneurship and cutting-edge innovations.

- Kibbutzim are the communal farms that grew out of Labor Zionism ideology, attracting Jewish pioneers with an interest in "making the desert bloom" through labor. Kibbutzim practice democracy and traditionally hold all property in common. There are around 270 such collectives still operating in Israel today. About 8 percent of Israelis live on Kibbutzim- or Moshav-style collectives.
- As of June 2007, 90 Israeli companies were listed on the U.S. NASDAQ stock exchange, more than any other foreign country.
- Israel has the highest number of startup companies of any country except the U.S.

Advancement of Women

Since the founding of Israel in 1948, women have played a vital role in governing, developing, and protecting the nation.

- In 1969, Golda Meir became Israel's first female prime minister, the third elected female leader of any country.
- Israeli women remain active at all levels of government, as evidenced by Israel's 2008 foreign minister, Tzipi Livni; Speaker of the Knesset (Israel's parliament) Dalia Itzik; and High Court judge Dorit Beinisch.
- Israeli women serve in all branches of the Israel Defense Forces, are eligible for conscription, and serve alongside men in all units.
- Women represent 45 percent of Israel's labor force, the same percentage as in the United States.



Ariel Sharon and Tzipi Livni



Golda Meir



Dalia Itzik



Pride Parade in Jerusalem—2006



Dana International



Diverse Lifestyles

Israel continues to lead the way in protection and acceptance of diverse lifestyles.

- Israel is at the forefront of gay rights issues, prohibiting workplace discrimination in 1992, allowing openly homosexual soldiers to serve in 1993, and granting spousal benefits to same-sex couples in 1994.
- Uzi Even, a chemistry professor and nuclear weapons expert, was Israel's first openly homosexual Knesset member.
- Israeli's first drag queen, Dana International, took the country by storm in 1993 and won the Eurovision song competition in 1998.
- LGBT organizations and community centers are active throughout Israel, continuing to advocate for LGBT rights.

Democracy

Israel is a dynamic, modern democratic nation in which citizens of all political beliefs are represented.

- Israel's Knesset is composed of 12 separate parliamentary groups, including both secular and religious parties from all sides of the political spectrum.
- With dozens of newspapers in many languages, Israel has a free, open and privately owned press.
- The Supreme Court of Israel is an independent and equal branch of government and serves as the final court of appeals.
- Israel's prime minister, is the head of government, selected from a party that holds the largest number of parliament seats. Israel's head of state is the president, selected by the Knesset to perform a largely ceremonial role.



Enthusiastic crowd awaiting election's results



Knesset members



Leisure and Recreation

An energetic and cosmopolitan people, Israelis enjoy a wide variety of entertainment activities.

- With Israel's long and beautiful coastline, beach activities and water sports are popular Israeli diversions. Israel has the highest number of qualified scuba divers per capita in the world.
- From its nightclubs featuring internationally renowned DJs to its around-the-clock cafés, the city of Tel Aviv has earned its nickname, "the city that never stops."
- Sports enthusiasts have many popular teams to celebrate. One of the most successful, Maccabi Tel Aviv, boasts five European basketball championships.
- Israelis love to spend time outdoors, hiking and biking in the country's many protected national parks and nature reserves. In northern Israel, winter skiing is a popular pastime.



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